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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KIRKUK 000121

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SUBJECT: ASSYRIAN LEADERS ON ARTICLE 140, SECURITY

CLASSIFIED BY: Jim Bigus, PRT Team Leader, Kirkuk, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: PRT team leader met with Assyrian Democratic Movement Kirkuk Chairman Sargon Lazar on June 20 and Assyrian Archbishop Louis Sako on June 21 to discuss implementation of Article 140. Lazar said there were rumors of a falling out between President Talabani and PM Maliki over Article 140 implementation. Both Lazar and Sako believed violence could be avoided if the Kurds managed the Article 140 implementation process transparently and reached out to the Arabs and Turkmen. The Arabs would be the hardest to win over. Involving the UN in the census and referendum would give the process credibility with non-Kurds. Lazar saw the recent uptick in violence in Kirkuk as related to maneuvering over Article 140 but Sako blamed it on terrorists who had been pushed out of other areas. Sako claimed more young Muslims were expressing interest in Christianity as a reaction to the violence of Muslim extremists. End Summary.

Article 140

¶2. (C) Lazar opened the meeting by saying people were tired of talking about Article 140 and wanted the process to begin so they could start shaping the negotiations. After two years of talking people had lost faith in Baghdad and Kirkuk officials. Just getting some sort of process started would restore faith and possibly reduce tensions, which were growing while the process was on hold. The exact structure of a process was not as important as transparency. UN supervision would contribute greatly to peoples' faith in the process and Lazar hoped the government would request it. Getting an accurate census was also critical.

¶3. (C) Lazar said he had heard there was a falling out between President Talabani and PM Maliki over the composition of the committee Maliki had called for to implement Article 140. One controversial choice was Communist Party leader Hamid Majid Musa, whom the Turkmen objected to because of his role in killing Turkmen in 1958. Lazar said he did not know if the falling out was serious or simply part of the initial bargaining process. He predicted forming a committee acceptable to all sides would be difficult and take some time.

¶4. (C) Another problem, Lazar said, was that the ethnic groups in Kirkuk suffered from internal division. The Kurds were the best organized but even they were split between PUK and KDP. If there could be one representative speaking authoritatively for the Turkmen, Arabs, and Kurds a solution would be found relatively quickly. Asked if there was any appeal to non-Kurds to Kirkuk's joining the KRG because of improved security, Lazar said the "Arabs will not be ruled by Kurds and will not think about it any further than that." For others, continuing KDP-PUK tension did not give confidence that incorporation into the KRG would guarantee security. Turkmen might be more willing to

compromise. Their neighborhoods were geographically distinct and perhaps they would accept some sort of special autonomous status for their regions within the KRG or some other special status arrangement. If they were to accept it, perhaps the Arabs could be persuaded to accept something similar.

15. (C) Sako said he was optimistic about the Article 140 implementation process. People were tired of violence after 35 years. The Kurds, who were "now the majority," were smart enough to manage the process though they were making mistakes. They should be careful not to make provocative speeches, not to say on TV that Kirkuk was Kurdish. They especially should not talk about expelling anyone but rather offer more attractive compensation packages. "They have the money. Everybody knows the Kurds will do everything to win. It all depends on the manner." The Coalition could help with public information campaigns about the census and referendum. Winning over the Arabs was the key element and most difficult. The Kurds were already working privately with the shaykhs and Turkmen factions to divide the opposition. The Turkmen Front had already changed its position to favor the referendum.

Security -----

16. (SBU) Lazar said business life in Kirkuk had not yet fully recovered from the series of VBIED attacks following the death of al-Zarqawi. There were rumors of more VBIEDs being prepared and many shop owners and markets were staying closed. Lazar believed the VBIED activity was related to Article 140. "Why so many here, why not Salah ad-Din?" Kirkuk was experiencing a "security vacancy, no one is in charge, there is no loyalty of the citizens to each other." Lazar said there were only 5,000 - 6,000 Assyrians left in Kirkuk, the majority having moved to Europe, the U.S. and Australia. Any Assyrian who had the means to do so would leave because of security and "no trust in a government that does not represent them."

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17. (SBU) Like Lazar, Sako said that business in Kirkuk had slowed following the series of VBIED attacks but attributed the upsurge of violence to terrorists who had been pushed out of other areas. He noted that Kirkuk was suffering a brain drain because of the security situation, especially kidnappings, with 30,000 USD being the average ransom price. Nonetheless Sako was optimistic on the security front, saying the death of al-Zarqawi was the beginning of the end of the insurgency and that he expected terrorism in the Kirkuk area "will finish after one more year."

Young Muslims Interested in Christianity -----

18. (C) Sako said the churches recently were being approached by young Muslims asking for literature on Christianity and sometimes asking to be baptized. These requests were refused so as not to upset the Muslims. He thought many of these young people were appalled by the violence done in the name of Islam and were looking for alternative paths to spirituality. He noted that a bumper sticker showing the shahada (profession of the faith) with a sword, taken to be an endorsement of Muslim religious violence, was becoming more popular in town. Muslims needed more education about their own religion so as not to be manipulated by extremist religious leaders.

Bio Notes -----

19. (SBU) Luis Sako is the archbishop of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Kirkuk. He has good relations with all the communities of Kirkuk. He has a PhD in Philosophy and Theology and is a specialist on Islam. He participates in academic conferences abroad and in interfaith conferences with Muslim religious leaders. He is editor-in-chief of Najmat-Al-Sharq Magazine (Christian, cultural).

¶10. (SBU) Sargon Lazar is a leading member of the Assyrian Democratic Movement. A political moderate, he has good relations with all of Kirkuk's ethnicities. He was forced to flee to Iran in the 1980s because of his role in opposition to the Saddam Hussein regime.

Comment

¶11. (C) The Christian community works well and closely with the Kurds and their views are colored accordingly. Both Lazar and Sako saw the Kurdish takeover of Kirkuk as inevitable and not necessarily a bad thing for the city as long as the Kurds managed it properly and avoided violence. The idea of UN participation in the Article 140 implementation process, however unrealistic, is very popular with non-Kurd Kikukis. Sako is optimistic by nature -- we do not know anyone else who expects terrorism to end in Kirkuk after one year. We cannot judge to what extent young Muslims are interested in Christianity but Sako's comments come a few weeks after local press reported the Bishop in Sulaymaniya said was "destabilizing" for people to change their traditional religions. End Comment.
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